



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

AFGHANISTAN

Assistance to Women

Fall 2009



Photo: USAID/Afghanistan

A woman demonstrates her carpet-weaving skills in Mazari Sharif. From home-based businesses to entrepreneurial start-ups, women's role in the economic growth of Afghanistan has increased exponentially since 2002.

GENDER SNAPSHOT

- More than 625,000 women and children receive health treatment monthly.
- 108,799 micro-finance loans worth \$24.6 million have been extended to women.
- 52,500 female goat herders received cashmere-harvesting and -marketing training, enabling them to earn higher profits.
- More than 54,000 female students gained an education in USAID-funded community-based schools.

BACKGROUND

Long-excluded from education, healthcare, employment, and participation in public life, Afghan women continue to suffer from illiteracy, poor health, and extreme poverty. The country's maternal mortality and female illiteracy rates are among the highest in the world, while women's life expectancy – 44 years – is among the lowest. Afghan women not only face urgent humanitarian needs, but their untapped energy and productivity are essential for sustainable peace, security, and development in Afghanistan.

The United States Government is committed to removing constraints on women's potential because their participation in rebuilding Afghanistan is essential. USAID supports legal rights for women, helps them gain access to public services and jobs, builds their capacity, and encourages their inclusion in public life. USAID programs help ensure a better future for Afghanistan's women and their families, communities, and country.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

To remedy past discrimination and advance gender equality, USAID programs include components that directly benefit women and girls. These programs provide education and vocational training, increase women's participation in society, and help them gain legal rights and employment.

INCREASING ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

Afghan women suffer from extremely high rates of maternal mortality, malnutrition, anemia, post-war trauma, and clinical depression. With one of the world's highest rates of tuberculosis, Afghan women constitute approximately 70 percent of sufferers. Following the dissolution of the Taliban government, the vast majority of women had little or no access to quality health care. Even today, an Afghan woman dies every 30 minutes from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth.

To address these urgent problems, USAID programs bring basic health and essential hospital services to women in 13 provinces. These programs provide maternal health care and immunizations; treat malnutrition, communicable diseases, mental health problems, and disabilities; and provide essential medications. Between 2002 and 2009, Afghans' access to health and hospital services increased from eight percent to approximately 64 percent. More than 625,000 women and children now receive health treatment monthly. The infant mortality rate, which was the highest in the world under the Taliban, has fallen 22 percent since 2002.

Support for midwife associations and midwifery education programs have helped to curb maternal mortality. As it is considered unsuitable for male doctors to treat women, USAID activities aim to increase the number of female health workers and promote women's entry into medical fields.

INCREASING LITERACY AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Under the Taliban, girls were not allowed to attend school. As a result, approximately 80 percent of rural Afghan women are illiterate. Today, 35 percent of the six million students in school are female. Yet, girls still face



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Assistance to Women (continued)



Photo: USAID/Afghanistan

Girls now account for 35 percent of the six million students enrolled in school. Girls were barred from formal education during Taliban rule.



Photo: USAID/Afghanistan

Since 2002, USAID has trained more than 670 female journalists, strengthening the independent media network across the country.

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formidable obstacles to education, including restricted mobility and access, severe shortages of female teachers, social resistance in some parts of the country, and early marriage. As a result, USAID provides training and support to teachers and educational policymakers. USAID also funds community-based education in areas with no government schools, which has provided literacy and numeracy skills for more than 54,000 female students. Additionally, USAID funds the printing and distribution of textbooks to girls, construction of girls' schools, and has built a dormitory at Kabul University for more than 1,000 young women.

DEVELOPING ECONOMIC GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

Decades of war left Afghanistan's estimated 50,000 widows to cope in an environment with few resources, public services, and ways to earn a living. In response, USAID supports programs designed to lift women out of dire circumstances and promote broader economic growth, providing credit and business training that help women participate in the economy. As of September 2009, one rural enterprise program issued 108,779 micro-finance loans to women, for a total of \$24.6 million. USAID creates income generating opportunities for women who must work from home and provides marketing services for their products. Female entrepreneurs also receive assistance to pursue commercial opportunities in fields ranging from horticulture and food processing to veterinary science and cashmere harvesting.

SUPPORTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Women have long been restricted from public life in Afghanistan even though the Constitution stipulates women have legal status equal to men. Violations of women's rights are common and widespread. Access to justice is hampered by women's limited awareness of their rights, and the formal justice system has limited reach to them outside of urban centers. To promote change, USAID provides women's rights awareness training for female law students and judges, sponsors roundtables to promote public debate and dialogue on women's rights in Islam, helps build their skills to influence public policy and to reform advocacy efforts, supports equal voter registration outreach, assists women candidates, and promotes gender equality in political parties.

USAID has trained 78 female judges and provided them the tools to officiate over the courts, manage cases, and ensure due process. Additionally, USAID has provided media training to more than 670 female journalists, strengthening the independent media network across the country.

HELPING WOMEN PARTICIPATE IN CIVIL SOCIETY

The Ambassador's Small Grants Program to Support Gender Equality in Afghanistan is a three-year, \$27,000,000 program to strengthen the skills of gender-related, Afghan-led NGO and civil society organizations. The program provides flexible, rapid response grants to NGOs that lack the financial management experience to receive grants directly from the U.S. Government. The program also works within the Ministry of Women's Affairs to provide technical assistance and small grants to prospective Afghan NGOs.